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ABSTRACT

The new television series "Between the Lions" on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) is designed to teach children ages 4 to 7 the values and purposes for literacy, along with the skills they need to become literate. Highlighted among the curriculum components are: (1) purposes of reading, including reading for pleasure, information, and for assistance in doing something; (2) understanding the nature and structure of texts, including stories, poems, and newspaper articles; (3) understanding the structure of words; (4) understanding the alphabetic principle; (5) knowledge of a substantial number of high-frequency words; and (6) understanding key concepts and conventions of print. The show builds on knowledge and practice gleaned from both holistic and skills-based approaches to instruction, and a whole-part-whole framework defines each episode's format. Research has indicated kindergartners who watched episodes significantly outperformed their nonviewing peers. A number of outreach avenues have been formed, including workshops, a Web site, printable skills practice materials, and a kindergarten teacher's guide to the series. (EF)

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Between the Lions: Public Television Promotes Early Literacy.

by Dorothy S. Strickland and Linda K. Rath

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J.M. Irwin

Public Television Promotes Early Literacy

Dorothy S. Strickland
Linda K. Rath

Strange and wonderful things are happening in the library these days. A tornado blows through and makes a terrible mess, but Pecos Bill comes to the rescue. A rambunctious ram pops out of a storybook, butts everyone in sight, and refuses to go back. A pair of jazzy shoes dance right off a page and groove to some cool, bebop music.

To be sure, these are extraordinary events. But then, this is no ordinary library. This library is the home of a family of lions:

Theo, the papa

Cleo, the mama

Lionel, their son

Leona, their daughter

Along with a host of other fascinating and playful characters, the lion family engages in all kinds of intriguing adventures.

This is the setting for *Between the Lions,* a new television series on the U.S. Public Broadcasting System (PBS) designed to teach children aged 4 to 7 the values of and purposes for literacy, along with the skills they need to become literate. The series is coproduced by WGBH, the PBS station in Boston, Massachusetts, and Sirius Thinking, Ltd., in New York.

Curriculum

We have both been involved in the series' development -- Dorothy as one of the advisors to the curriculum, and Linda as *Between the Lions* curriculum director. The development team included classroom teachers and a group of writers, musicians, and media talent. The process -- from concept to production to the April 2000 premiere -- took nearly 5 years. The goal was to produce a television program that is both grounded in what is known about teaching young children to read and capable of capturing and holding their attention and interest (Rath, 2000).

Highlighted among the curriculum components are

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- The purposes of reading, including reading for pleasure, information, and for assistance in doing something
- An understanding of the nature and structure of texts, including stories, poems, and newspaper articles
- An understanding of the structure of words
- An understanding of the alphabetic principle
- Knowledge of a substantial number of high-frequency words
- An understanding of key concepts and conventions of print

Pecos Bill Cleans Up the West

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A storybook tornado blows into the library and makes a terrible mess.

Key word:	west
Word family:	-est (-ess, -ell, -et)
Target vowel:	short "e"
High-frequency sight words:	in, the, was
New vocabulary:	fictional, imaginary, lasso, steady, tall tale, tornado, twister, unwelcome

The show builds on knowledge and practice gleaned from both holistic and skills-based approaches to instruction. A "whole-part-whole" framework (Strickland, 1998) defines the format for each episode. Whole texts of a variety of types open each show and form the basis for teasing out various textual features. These receive more focused, direct instruction designed to foster skillful, strategic reading.

For example, in "Pecos Bill Cleans Up the West," the lion family reads and sings about this tall-tale hero. The cubs are so intrigued with Bill's heroic acts that they bring him into the library to answer questions, accidentally bringing a twister along with him. Meanwhile, the key word *west* suggests a series of segments, all designed to give viewers more exposure to words with the "short *e*" sound. (The illustration is a portion of a page from the resources area of the series Web site.) This leads to a related installment of the comic book adventures of Cliff Hanger and to a delightfully staged tongue twister. Toward the end of the episode, the lion family returns to the story of Pecos Bill, this time writing their own chapter to accomplish a magical clean up of the twister-struck library.

The show makes use of a captivating ensemble cast and blends animation, puppets, live action, and music. Included are Martha Reader and the Vowelles, who sing the sounds made by the great vowels, a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y. Dr. Ruth Wordheimer -- played by the real-life Dr. Ruth Westheimer -- eases anxiety by providing advice for treating "long-word freakout." Words are spelled out by a variety of characters, including Tiger Words and some live knights in armor, who crash into each other to blend word parts together.

Icons from the Web site, representing some of the series' supporting players

Text, read aloud by a narrator, often appears on the screen with words highlighted as they are voiced. Song

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lyrics are shown with a bouncing ball, reminiscent of "Sing along with Mitch Miller," to help children follow. Needless to say, there is never a dull moment.

Research

The producers of *Between the Lions* used research-based recommendations to design a curriculum that fosters early literacy development. The team also asked independent researchers to evaluate the show's appeal and instructional effectiveness. In the summer of 1999, over a hundred children at seven sites across the United States viewed two pilot episodes, and their responses were closely studied (Flagg, 1999). A second evaluation was completed by researchers at the Juniper Gardens Children's Project in Kansas City, just before the April 2000 launch of the series (Linebarger, 2000). The study included 164 kindergarten and first-grade students from several schools, half of whom watched 17 ready-to-air episodes (8.5 hours of viewing time) while the remainder served as a nonviewing control group. The kindergartners who watched *Between the Lions* significantly outperformed their nonviewing peers on key tasks known to predict later fluent reading: word knowledge, concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound knowledge. Moreover, the shows were found to be enormously appealing and popular among viewers and their teachers. This sentiment is echoed by television critics, who in July honored the series with the Television Critics Association Award for Children's Programming, naming it the best children's show on television.

Outreach

Reaching a broad audience is another goal of the *Lions* initiative. A group of 15 national organizations -- including the American Library Association (ALA), the Girl Scouts of the USA, and the International Reading Association -- have signed on as "Founding Partners" to help design and implement an outreach plan. Conference presentations and community projects will help families "get wild about reading." The ALA will conduct series-related workshops at 20 local libraries, while Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) Book Cubs will be piloting a read-aloud program designed to improve family reading habits. Plans are also afoot for a nationwide "Designated Reader" public awareness campaign to promote the benefits of reading aloud to children every day.

Of course there is a *Between the Lions* Web site, where young readers and writers from all over the world can log on for more fun with stories and words. Site users can follow a multilevel adventure map related to each weekly episode. Each adventure begins with a story to be read and downloaded. Users subsequently move on to clever word games for phonemic awareness and spelling practice, interactive news reporting, and "takeaway games" to be played away from the computer. A list of recommended trade books to match each episode's theme is also featured on the Web site. There are printable materials for practicing skills, and a host of resources for parents. Educational print materials are in development this summer, beginning with a kindergarten teachers' guide to the series, titled *Get Wild about Teaching Reading.* Where the outreach will stop is anybody's guess.

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About the Authors

Dorothy Strickland is the State of New Jersey Professor of Reading at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, USA. She is a past president of the International Reading Association and of the Reading Hall of Fame. Her publications include *The Administration and Supervision of Reading Programs; Emerging Literacy; Language, Literacy and the Child;* and *Teaching Phonics Today.* She has received the National Council of Teachers of English Rewey Belle Inglis Award for Outstanding Womanin English Education and the Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts award, and IRA's Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading award. Her latest book, *Beginning Reading and Writing,* coedited with Lesley Mandel Morrow, will be published in September 2000 by Teachers College Press and the International Reading Association. Dorothy can be contacted at strickla@rci.rutgers.edu.

Linda Rath is the curriculum director for *Between the Lions.* She holds a doctorate in education from Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, USA, where she researched early literacy and reading disabilities, supervised teachers at the Harvard Reading Laboratory, and taught courses on evaluating instructional materials. More recently, she designed curriculum for an intervention project funded by the U.S. National Institute for Child Health and Human Development and conducted professional development initiatives for several school districts in New England. She also serves as reading and technology representative to the Greater Boston Council of the International Reading Association. Contact her by e-mail at feedback@betweenthelions.org.

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